

Ode to Julian

Lauren Elmore

To most, he was only a name.

Grandmothers and grandfathers whispered to him at night, beginning to sing his song. Mothers and fathers used his name as a curse, a punishment, a final warning to disobeying children. Brothers and sisters told stories about him to each other in the dead of the night. Preachers, donning black polyester suits and off-white Jordans, heralded his name to hundreds, instilling fear in those who listened. Voices sung out to him from all corners of earth, a choir of men and women alike, congregated in unison to sing to him.

To some, he was a person. A master of souls, marching people to their graves. Snow fell on fire as he led the dead to a place beyond the horizon. He held a sickle and adorned a hood—an outfit he always found humorous, personally, as he preferred a pea coat and an Apple Watch—.

People mimicked him, wearing his skin and flesh to command fear in other, staining his name. In war, he was an old friend, a comrade on the lines of both sides, stepping into battle with soldiers. At home, they told stories, painting him as the enemy. Warriors wearing camouflage and steel toed boots sprayed with green and red had danced in his grip to his song before twisting out of it, moving to their next partner.

To few, he was neither. He was an entity they didn't believe in but still spoke of, just with different names. He was the name of death. He was the blame behind the bad. He voided responsibility, he atoned for other's sins.

His role had changed, melding and shifting along with the Earth's plates. He had once been worshipped, gifted, sacrificed to. Then, he was feared. People ran from their fate and pulled others

from his grasp. He became a curse, his spoken name was a crime of hate, vanishing into the corners of the world too dark to light. He was an evil the world wanted to be rid of. Stories and songs were written of people's triumph over him, he had become life's biggest conquest.

And then, he was forgotten. He was a watcher, a shadow, a darkness, disappearing into the night, only returning when called upon.

* *

She held Julian's hand between her fingers, massaging it under her thumb, circling around his palm like a clock, ticking away at the minutes.

Her son was a ghost. His skin was pale, so pale that she could trace the veins up his arms and back towards his heart. The doctors, the ones in charge of bringing him back to life, only foretold of death for him. Yet, she still found herself hoping and praying that somehow, the doctors would be wrong this time, that they had misjudged their calculations. They had been wrong before, when they went about making promises of years to live and baseball games to attend and birthdays and weddings and graduations.

Julian's hand twitched in hers, and she loosened her grip on it, her hand now nearly as white as his. Her son let out another long rasp, choking at the end of it, the air whistling from his nose.

He turned his head towards her, a face without the pain, without the sick, a face that looked at her from the past, from a time before. A face so familiar that she almost allowed herself to believe the doctor was wrong. And, he spoke, his voice lowered by an octave,

‘Mom, I’m scared.’

She wanted to dive into those words, to break and crumble under their weight. She wanted to cry out, and say that she was too, and seek comfort within him. But, she didn’t. Her thumb continued, ticking away the seconds on her hand, and she lied,

‘Don’t be.’

He, with sickle and hood, was called to the house on the eve of the new century. It rested on the corner of Cedar Hill Road.

At first, the song was just a whisper in the air. For days, it sang to him. He ignored its call. And yet, it continued, singing, crying its melody into the winter night. Notes hung on trees, dripping from icicles as the sun rose from the ashes.

Snow hummed his ballad, coating the air with its silence, hanging onto the clouds, holding them to the ground. The quiet was his footsteps in the snow, his track, marking his path between souls.

Julian had lasted the night, and she almost wished he hadn’t. The gap between his breaths had grown longer, the metronome of his lungs slowing its tempo. If she were to blink, to leave the room, to even think of letting his hand go, she feared she would miss his last breath. She was his

lifeline, grounding him to that which was living. The pink in her hands melted into his, and she warmed the dead alive.

Trophies and baseball bats line the shelves of his room, telling the story of a life before. Before all of this. A life before this was only six months ago. With one visit to the doctor's, they were reborn into a new one. One without baseball bats but with needles. One without lunchboxes but with pill pouches. One without baseball games but with doctors' appointments.

Sometimes, she wondered if she should just take the pillow that propped his head up and make it quick. To end his suffering, saving him the pain, the pain of his lungs dissolving and closing in, the pain of what once had held him together to pull him apart, piece by piece. The pain of fighting.

Her husband still had hope. He held his hand with such strength and passion that she knew Julian wasn't the only person in the room struggling to stay alive.

The snow stopped falling when his hand touched the door. The symphony of the world followed his footsteps, becoming silent as he entered the house.

He walked through the corridor, making his way towards the room, following the song. It was in the back of the house, the voice muffled by a large wooden door meant to keep dangers out. Just next to it, a fire that had burned just days ago sat, only a few embers remaining in it, the heat from it long disappeared into the winter air.

The door opened for him, and he watched from afar for a few moments. A man and a woman surrounded a bed, each holding a child's hand in their own.

The child was the one calling to him.

The room's atmosphere changed, off pitch, falling out of tune with the universe. She had always been able to feel death. It had taken her mother from her hands. She felt him in that moment. It was the feeling of looking into a room that light had never touched, a room that had never felt warmth, a room that had never felt life. And death was here again, waiting to take her son from her.

The child opened his eyes, staring deep into *his* presence. The mother was whispering to the father, her voice now in sync with her son's. She stared around the room. Her eyes skimmed over his, ignoring what she was looking for.

Death breathed life back into her, and she gripped her son's hand tighter between her fingers as Julian's eyes danced around her face. The clarity was no longer there, a fog had replaced any semblance of her child's eyes. She was looking into the eyes of a corpse. And he was looking at death.

'I won't let him take you from me,' she whispered to the body. Perhaps he was already gone. 'I promise.'

She knew he was here. Most parents did. But he was not here to take or steal. He was a guide to those who were lost, nestled between the planes of existence, stuck between two finalities of life and death.

She was not ready for him, not yet. So, he simply waited. For an hour, the mother and father never left the child's side. And, neither did he, biding his time. Slowly, he inched closer towards the child, closing in the distance between him and it. It had begun to sing louder and louder with each passing moment.

Julian sucked in a deep rasping breath. It juttered around in his chest like a car's engine that wouldn't start. There were only a few moments left with him, and all of the words disappeared from her mind at once, her cotton tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, and she couldn't find the air to say anything. She was the one dying instead of him. She's the one who's body was failing her, who's lungs no longer breathed for her, who's body no longer willed itself to carry on.

She couldn't speak of the love in her heart for him or the hole that would be left there without him. She couldn't whisper to him that he would be okay or that there was nothing to be afraid of. She couldn't offer him any sort of comfort as he lay in front of her, wheezing and struggling for his next breath that could very well be his last.

Tears seeped down her face, falling onto her boy's hand. He didn't look up, he didn't open his eyes, but his eyelashes gave one last flutter, and he rubbed her hand between his own sticky palm.

The parents could not hear the child's song.

It had always disappointed him how the alive never listened to the songs of the dead. Children sang most beautifully before they came with him. No longer were they held back by grief or fear, their voices were tuned into the earth. They were filled with love and passion. They sang songs of innocence.

Their stories of death overshadowed their stories of life. Some were songs of relief. Others were songs of mourning, not for themselves, but for those left behind.

Julian rasped again, his breath turning flat and sour in the room, off-key. She bent forward, listening, straining her ear for the sounds of life and hope.

It was time.

The earth stilled for a moment, and he wandered over towards the edge of the bed, stepping beside the mother and leaning down towards the child.

She felt him go. And she wept. She begged. She pleaded for death to return her child. She held on tighter to him, hoping that somehow, she could anchor his life to the bed with her arms.

The child stopped his song, ending his solo.

It looked around wildly, sitting up in the bed, twisting around in its position, its eyes glazed in fear and loneliness.

Death was a lonely world.

It reached towards its mother and father while salt and sorrow crept down its face. The parents didn't reach back, instead, their eyes were enchanted with the body, ignoring the child. They grasped onto the cold flesh of their once loved one, their tears writing notes for their elegy. The child poked and prodded, crying out for their love, their embrace.

Holding out his hand, he waited for the child to grasp it.

It waited for a moment, hesitating beside the foot of the bed, whispering a sonnet to them. Their ears were deaf to the dead.

The child turned, silent once more, for a moment, and then two.

And then, it glanced up at him, its eyes widening. Hand met hand, and he looked down at the child, helping him free from the shackles of his body. Their hands melded together, bridging his life to death.

The child hummed, quiet at first, the sound of a hummingbird, or that of a bee.

It took a tentative step forward, walking with legs of a newborn deer. And, it turned, glancing back towards the mother of father, one last time. Its hand hovered by its side, fingers forming a wave. A beat passed, and then a measure. But its attention returned to him, eyes now void of glass.

And together, they left, out of the room, out of the house, and into the snow, through the chatter of the night. The hum had become a tune, harmonious and slow.

He joined the child in its new song, their voices forming chords, morphing into a melody. At first it started soft, the light taps of fingers on a piano, and then it grew, climbing to a crescendo.

The child became a note, joining into the song of the world, falling into the rhythm and movement of the souls of the forgotten.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ she said, whispering into the skin of her son. He couldn’t hear her.

But, he wasn’t.